

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Saudi Arabia presides over G-20 interfaith forum

By **Aya Batrawy** | AP

Oct. 13, 2020 at 11:27 a.m. CDT



DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia is presiding over a virtual global interfaith forum that began on Tuesday, with participation from Muslim clerics, Jewish rabbis, Christian priests and others religious figures.

The kingdom is hosting the online event as part of its presidency this year of the Group of 20 leading rich and developing nations.

Saudi Arabia has embarked more assertively in recent years on an outreach to Jewish and Christian groups. Some of those efforts have coincided with a broader alignment of interests and emerging ties between the Gulf Arab states and Israel, which share a common foe in Iran.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has also overseen efforts to supplant a religiously conservative Saudi identity with one rooted in hyper-nationalism, following decades of adherence to a hard-line interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism, which has flourished in the kingdom.

Faisal bin Muaammar, who heads the Saudi-funded International Dialogue Center organizing the five-day forum, told The Associated Press the purpose of the event is to enhance relationships among different faiths.

“We are talking about a relationship between religions, between Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. The dialogue has no political agenda at all, or a political direction in terms of political conversations or negotiations,” he said.

Still, he said interfaith forums like this can help build bridges between people and countries.

“If it is used for the right reasons, the input of religious leaders or religious parties is excellent for any peace process in the world,” he said.

The event had been envisioned to be held in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, a rare gathering of diverse religious figures in the conservative Islamic nation. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the forum is being held virtually like other high-profile G-20 events hosted by Saudi Arabia.

Speakers at Tuesday’s opening session included the Saudi religious affairs minister, the secretary general of the Saudi-based Muslim World League, the grand mufti of Egypt, archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and ecumenical patriarch, the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, and U.N. representatives.

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